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ABSTRACT

The question of how agricultural education students and faculty define and hope to foster student success was studied at a large southeastern land-grant university with a college of agriculture that included 1,497 students and 193 faculty. The study questions were explored in 2 focus groups containing a total of 7 faculty members and 8 focus groups containing a total of 26 students. Faculty members defined student success in primarily academic terms: maintaining academic success, securing a position in a chosen career field, graduating, and applying lessons learned during the college experience to other life situations. Students tended to define student success less in academic terms and more in terms of general life satisfaction. They viewed happiness and satisfaction as the true measures of success, with academic achievement holding a less central role in defining a successful college career. Barriers to student success identified by faculty were lack of motivation and poor time management skills. Students identified the following barriers: poor quality instruction, poor communication, large classes, and time management and study habits. Faculty solutions focused on students' internal characteristics and willingness to prepare for and participate in classroom discussions, whereas students saw both internal and external solutions. (MN)

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DEFINING AND ACHIEVING STUDENT SUCCESS: UNIVERSITY FACULTY AND STUDENT PERSPECTIVES

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DEFINING AND ACHIEVING STUDENT SUCCESS: UNIVERSITY FACULTY AND STUDENT PERSPECTIVES

Leaders at many institutions are actively pursuing methods that might influence student success in a measurable way. At a large university such as the one hosting this research, the struggle to improve student success has resulted in a great variety of strategies, with differing levels of effectiveness as a result of student participation (Blanks, 1997). Although all interventions are done with the intent of improved success, participation levels appear not to impact the effectiveness of each of the interventions. It might be assumed that if student and faculty perceptions conform to each other, the intervention would be more successful. Determining how various populations perceive success, therefore, could have a marked effect on interventions that are currently being pursued or proposed.

Introduction and Theoretical Framework

In an effort to understand the dimensions of success, we look first to the classic psychological theories that attempt to explain how success is defined and actualized. For example, behaviorism might describe success in terms of actions that produce pleasing consequences in one's environment, and to achieve success, would simply entail increasing the frequency of those actions that bring about positive results. According to cognitive theory, success is related not to environmental standards but to experiences that match internal perceptions. Again, achieving success would entail increasing the frequency of experiences that match personal ideals (Hamilton and Ghatala, 1994). A combination of these two theories known as social learning provides an image of achieving success that is determined through a combination of personal and social factors (Hamilton and Ghatala, 1994).

Current research has led to the development of other theories that may help to explain why students are successful. For example, a "choice theory," developed by Glasser (1996), hypothesizes that students choose, either consciously or unconsciously, to pursue successful behavior based on how experiences in their environment affect their perceptions of positive and negative actions. In other words, if participation in an experience has brought satisfaction to one of what Glasser calls the four psychological needs of belonging, power, freedom, and fun, then in the future similar actions will be pursued because the end is viewed as successful.

To provide some insight into this complexity, Lindgren (1969) described college success by discussing what he sees as the two major reasons for failure as a student. The first, an environmental cause, concerns a lack of skills with which to properly meet the many challenges presented by the postsecondary experience. The second, a personal cause, is due to a poor attitude with which to approach postsecondary education that discourages both motivation and persistence. Student success, then, is not just a matter of knowing *how*, but also, and possibly more importantly, knowing *why*.

Arnold (1995) also expounded on the multifaceted nature of student success through a longitudinal study she made of high school valedictorians. As the students in her study went through their postsecondary education, she discovered that there were four different dimensions or levels by which they measured their success. The first two levels were academic success and professional success, as measured by outward signs such as grades, job titles, and awards. Next, the researcher investigated the level of satisfaction that each of her participants felt in their present situation. If they felt they had been successful based on their own personal measures, then this perception would override the other external measures that were mentioned above. The highest level of success, according to Arnold, comes when an individual's ideal future becomes his or her present and one is living up to his or her expectations.

From an academic standpoint, Livengood (1992) used a questionnaire to determine students' definitions of success in the classroom and then used this definition to analyze their classroom behavior. As it turned out, those that defined success in terms of final course grades were very "performance-based" in the classroom and would sacrifice learning potential to ensure a favorable image and the highest grade. Those that defined success as an overall learning process, on the other hand, would be much more likely to sacrifice a good grade by choosing a more demanding professor or a more challenging assignment. (p. 257)

In addition, Schonwetter, Perry, and Struthers (1993) found several factors that in combination may determine a student's success in an individual course. Three of these characteristics that could have the most far-reaching consequences are a student's perception of control, a student's perception of success, and the expressiveness of the instructor in the classroom. For example, students may see themselves as successful but don't believe that they exert much control over that success. For them, the type of instruction they receive can have a much more significant impact on their performance than if there was a higher perception of control over the situation.

What is evident from this research is that success is a very widely defined construct. Although many students, faculty, and administrators might quantify outward success, simply in terms of grades and achievements, the research literature makes clear that these measures only represent the tip of the proverbial iceberg. The research presented in this paper represents an attempt to uncover the dimensions of success and its achievement as defined by the faculty and students of a single college population within a large southeastern land-grant university. The researchers hope that this research can influence future programming and practices positively due to an increased awareness of the perspectives held by those who work with student success on a daily basis.

Purpose

Many different parties are involved in trying to ensure the achievement of student success. These include faculty, student affairs professionals, parents, mentors, and the students themselves. All may speak of their endeavors to work toward the goal of "success", but if this goal is defined differently by each party, then each reaches a different goal. Combined with these misconceptions may be a sense of frustration

because other parties are not working toward one particular vision of student success, even while they are working toward their own. If nothing else, far more energy is devoted to the task of helping someone achieve success than may be necessary. With this in mind, it is imperative that we adequately define success within the college or university population before we try to develop programs to foster that success.

The purposes of this study are two-fold. First, this study will seek to define success based on the perspectives of student and faculty populations within the College of Agriculture and Life Sciences at Virginia Tech. Second, the researcher will apply the information gathered to make recommendations about the development of programs that would foster student success.

With this purpose in mind, focus groups were conducted, first with students and then with faculty from the College of Agriculture and Life Sciences at Virginia Tech. That data were analyzed separately and then compared between the two populations in an attempt to find answers to the following research questions:

- How do students and faculty members define student success?
- How do students and faculty members hope to achieve and foster student success, and what barriers do they encounter along the way?
- How do the perspectives of student success compare and contrast between faculty and students?

Methods

Population and Sample

The population for this study was limited to the students (N=1497) and faculty (N=193) of the agriculture college within a large southeastern land-grant university. No restrictions to students, such as class, gender, or race, were applied to further limit the population from which the sample was drawn. The only restriction made in the faculty population was that their main teaching assignment be at the Blacksburg (main) campus to increase the likelihood of participation if they were selected. A computer program was used to randomize all lists to eliminate any research bias in selecting samples. In addition, only essential information needed to organize the groups was included to minimize any invasion of privacy.

The student population lists were provided by the Institutional Research Service and were arranged in a stratified, randomly selected order, both according to undergraduate class and according to range of quality credit average (QCA). Only one list was produced for the faculty population, again with the only restriction being that the faculty member's primary assignment was at the Blacksburg campus. As with the student lists, the faculty list was randomly ordered. Since this was a qualitative study, no further attempt at randomization was made. The samples were purposively made in order to provide the target number of persons in each sample, see Table 1. Each person was

invited to participate by phone in the order they were included on the stratified, randomized population list. Solicitation continued until 10 students or faculty members for each group had agreed to participate. The overall target sample for the student population, therefore, was 100 people, the target sample for the faculty was 30 people, and overall the researchers hoped to include 130 in this study. (See Table 1)

Table 1. Target participant groups.

Population	QCA <2.0	QCA 2.0-3.0	QCA >3.0	Total
Students	4 groups total	4 groups total	2 groups total	10 groups total
	1 each Freshman, Sophomore, Junior, and Senior	1 each Freshman, Sophomore, Junior, and Senior	1 Freshman and Sophomore 1 Junior and Senior	100 students
Faculty				3 groups total, 30 faculty

Data Collection

The data collection for this study was completed in two phases. Student focus groups were conducted in the Spring semester of 1997, and faculty focus groups were conducted the following Spring semester of 1998. All focus groups were conducted using the following format: after introducing the focus group facilitator, the participants were told the main purpose of the groups, were made aware that the sessions would be audio-recorded and observed by a co-facilitator, and were asked to sign consent forms to verify willing participation. The focus group began with a discussion by the participants of the definition of student success, including the origins of those definitions as well as the various components that contributed to the overall concept. Once a general consensus was established among the group, the participants were asked to take a few minutes to consider the possible barriers to achieving students success, given their definition. Their ideas were written on index cards instead of being openly discussed with the group. These cards were then collected into one pile, and the participants were asked to group the cards into categories without speaking so as to minimize the influence of any one participant in particular. The participants then completed the questionnaire supplied by the facilitator.

The second half of the focus group consisted on a discussion of each of the categories that were created by the participants. It focused not only on barriers that they or other had experienced, but also on how these barriers could be (or had been) overcome to more closely approach the goal of student success. Other possible barriers to student success were also discussed, as well as other approaches that could be taken to foster student success within the college. The focus groups, then, generally ended in a positive, empowered atmosphere that was aimed at sparking some individual action within the

participants' own environments. This method of conducting focus groups is based on the method developed by Scott (1995) and employed in her dissertation research. In fact, the facilitator of the student groups received training from Dr. Scott prior to conducting the groups in Spring 1997.

This data was analyzed by hand. After the contents each tape were transferred to a typed format, the transcriptions were coded for information that was considered by the researcher to be pertinent information. In order to provide the most complete answers to the research questions, information was separated into four different sections: definitions of student success, barriers to success, potential solutions to improve the chances of success, and general comments made by the group. The student focus groups were analyzed separately, using the group formulation described in Table 1. Data from the three faculty focus groups were considered first separately then common themes were sought among the groups. Once themes had been determined for each class and for the faculty, the student groups were further analyzed to determine if groups with similar QCAs had similar views regardless of class. Finally, student views were compared with faculty views as a final analysis. This information that was transcribed was also compared with both the co-facilitator's observations and the questionnaire for validation and further insight. Due to the nature of this study, all information collected and analyzed was qualitative in nature.

Findings

As expected, the greatest problem that was encountered during the course of this study was in securing an adequate number of participants for each focus group. In most cases, the actual rate of participation was approximately 30% of what had been originally expected. Even so, those who did participate were very open about their experiences and provided the researchers with a great deal of valuable information. The findings reported below are based on two focus groups with faculty (7 participants total) and eight focus groups with students (26 participants total).

The foci of the two faculty groups that were interviewed were surprisingly different. The first group illustrated most of their examples of student success using either in-class or subject-related research examples, whereas the second group focused more on the out-of-class experience to substantiate success. Even with these differences, though, the essence of the information given was essentially similar. Success as a student meant maintaining academic success, securing a position in a chosen career field, graduation, and being able to apply lessons learned during the college experience to other situations in life. One student said:

> what is student success...? To get good enough grades, to graduate from [the institution], and to get a career in their area of choice.

There were several elements that both faculty groups considered barriers to students' achievement of success. Barriers that were referred to throughout the discussion included a lack of maturity, lack of motivation, and poor time management skills. Also mentioned by both groups was a participation in too many extra-curricular activities and

not enough contact with faculty. An interesting point to note was that only the second group touched on financial and family pressures as a barrier, although the first group did mention the need for additional financial aid during the course of the discussion. Typical faculty responses were:

> They equate work with study, so they think because they're putting in a lot of hours that they're studying hard, but...they don't study effectively.
>
> They're not going to change the night end when things end and start, but they don't like having to start at 8:00.
>
> I always joke with students: I'll have office hours and I'll put a nametag on.

The student groups were fairly similar in the information that they provided during their interviews. The most common element of student success that was mentioned by the groups was to simply be happy or satisfied with your experience in college. Stemming from that, students took a much more vague approach to student success, referring to a proficiency in all academic subjects, achieving a balance of all the elements of one's life, gaining practical experience to apply to the future, and achieving one's goals. Students did mention that maintaining good grades, graduating, and participating both in and out of class were indicators that one had achieved or was working towards achieving student success, but in the end it was the student who determined whether success had indeed been reached. Typical student comments were:

> It's going to vary by the student what comes first.
>
> being a successful student is somebody who is achieving the goals they have set, [because] people...go to college for different reasons.
>
> I think if you are successful it's that you got out of the experience what you wanted to.

The barriers to student success that were explored during the focus groups were also similar across student groups. The only differences were found among the freshman who related many barriers to their experiences in high school and among the seniors who seemed to prefer to blame the institutional system for their problems. On the other hand, several groups mentioned frustration in working with the graduate teaching assistants due to various communication problems. There were four main barriers that were mentioned by almost all groups. These were a lack of discipline, the need for better time management and study skills, participation in too many social activities, and an overall difficulty working in the college academic environment due to faculty and teaching style, class size, or grading methods. The freshmen and sophomore groups mentioned a lack of preparation for the college environment as a barrier, and about half of the student focus

groups mentioned personal problems as a barrier, stemming from difficulty with family, friends, and financial pressures. Students made comments such as the following:

> If I could go back and do it again, I...wouldn't treat high school the way I did, [and]...I probably would have had better skills and I would be more prepared.

> I'm here to learn something that will be practical and relevant to what I want to do in life and when...they are teaching you something that...nobody will ever use, that's when I tend to have troubles.

> Most freshmen that come in aren't really aware of the full impact of having absolute freedom and [that] you can do whatever you want now and you can get away with this and...that."

Many of the solutions that were offered by both students and the faculty were related to academic improvements either in the classroom or related to it. Faculty participants were concerned mainly with participation in the classroom through the use of unannounced quizzes to improve attendance and by improving group and public speaking assignments. Students were more interested in improving the accessibility or teaching styles of faculty, increasing the use and improving the quality of computers and other instructional technology, and providing more practical experience and training in basic skills through coursework.

> Faculty observation: I have a real problem with how much of it is really my responsibility and how much of it has to be their own personal responsibility.

> Student comment: Some people look at learning as for earning a living and other people look at learning just to live...a life-long learning thing; but the fact is learning and becoming a well-rounded person is not going to put dinner on my table.

The bulk of the other solutions to improve the chances of student success centered on communication in the university, primarily in terms of academic advising and orientation. Most groups felt very strongly about extending orientation into the first semester through assigning mentors, improving introductory courses, and ensuring that students are aware of available university resources before they encounter difficulties. In terms of advising, faculty saw the need for more frequent and more intensive advising, whereas students focused on the approachability and accessibility of advisors as elements

that needed improvement. Solutions that were discussed were generally constructive in nature and had merit.

> Faculty comment: How much are you really paying attention to these nitpicky details they're throwing at you in June and July when you...don't know how that relates...[or] applies.

> Student observation: As an analogy, I don't like...using the ATMs as much as I like going in to get the cash from the cashier. I think personal contact is...you know, it's somebody to talk to...

Conclusions

This study sought to determine how faculty and students perceive student success and its achievement at a large southeastern land-grant university. The data collected in the study justifies the following conclusions:

- Faculty in the College of Agriculture and Life Sciences tend to define student success in fairly focused academic terms: degree completion, good grades, and initial career establishment.

- Students tend to define student success in less focussed academic terms approach and a more in terms of a general life-satisfaction. They view overall happiness and satisfaction as the true measures of success, with academic achievement holding a less central role in defining a successful college career.

- Faculty identified the primary barriers to student success as being primarily internal focus, motivation, and time management.

- Students, on the other hand, focused on both external and internal barriers to their success. They were concerned with external factors of poor quality instruction, poor communication, and large classes. They also recognized internal problems arising from their own time management and study habits.

- Faculty solutions again focused on students' internal characteristics and their willingness to prepare for and to participate in classroom discussion and activities.

- Students saw both external and internal solutions. They would seek more appropriate instructional techniques and more appropriate classroom environments. At the same time, they agree that their own efforts need to be more academically focussed.

Discussion and Implications

It is interesting to note the fundamental difference in perspective between faculty and students in this study. Faculty appeared to blame students for their own lack of

success because they felt there were more than sufficient opportunities available to achieve success. Students, on the other hand, place part of the onus on the educational system and components such as class scheduling, instructor approachability, and instructor performance. They also admit to generating part of the problem with their own lack of dedication and discipline.

Even with that fundamental lack of agreement between faculty and students on student success, the results of this study were somewhat encouraging. At the very least, faculty and students had essentially similar viewpoints concerning both the basic elements of student success and its achievement. This observation must be made with caution, however, because faculty who agreed to participate and then actually participated in our focus groups may have been more involved with students than the population of faculty in general.

This method of research can easily be applied to a needs assessment system that examines the central constituents of the university, the faculty and students, to discover both where the students' problems lie and the measures that should be taken to improve student success. Faculty and students may also feel more ownership and, therefore, commitment to the university if they are given the chance to actively participate in the development of interventions or policies.

Finally, it is important that once the information from these focus groups has been collected and analyzed that it be disseminated to the university community at-large. The information presented by these participants is very valuable and can provide inspiration and awareness for other faculty and students who seek understanding and ways to improve their own situations. If we as researchers can help them in this way, they will certainly continue to help us.

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